DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 220 502 TM 820 515

AUTHOR Gillespie, Ellen B.
TITLE Implications of the Louisiana Basic Skills Test for Special Education Students.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education (New York, NY, March 20-22, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Community Involvement; Elementary Education; Emotional Disturbances; Individualized Education Programs; Mental Retardation; Minimum Competency Testing; Physical Disabilities; Research Problems; *Special Education; *State Programs; Test Format; *Testing Problems; *Testing Programs
IDENTIFIERS Louisiana; *Louisiana Basic Skills Test

ABSTRACT

The legislation mandating Louisiana's Basic Skills Test was consistent with federal legislation in specifically including special education students. The development of policy alternatives for the testing of these students, however, was a complex process. Related issues include: (1) inclusion/exclusion of special education students, (2) development of alternative standards for students not tested, (3) test procedural and format modifications, (4) issues involved in research based on the test performance of special education students, and (5) involvement of consumer advocacy organizations. Policy development in Louisiana has focused on individualizing decisions concerning test participation and modifications. Alternative standards have been developed for special education students not addressing state minimum skills. State Department of Education staff are working to solve difficulties in conducting research and reporting test scores of special education students. Consumer organizations are being involved in test development and implementation. (Author/BW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED220502

IMPLICATIONS OF THE LOUISIANA BASIC SKILLS TEST FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

by

Ellen B. Gillespie, Ph.D.
Louisiana State Department of Education
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

E. B. Gillespie

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

TM 820 515

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association and the National Council on Measurement in Education. New York, 1982.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE LOUISIANA BASIC SKILLS TEST FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

The development of the minimum competency testing movement in the last ten years was originally a reaction to public outcry over test scores indicating declining skills of high school graduates. As minimum competency testing programs have been implemented, however, they have developed into more comprehensive programs, often using test data for promotional decisions for all students. The many state and local programs vary along several dimensions, including program goals, competencies assessed, grade levels included, and provisions for special populations.

The issue of inclusion of special education students in such testing programs has been affected by federal legislation. Public Law 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, was enacted in 1975 and assures that handicapped children receive a free appropriate public education. An additional federal law, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, prohibits recipients of any federal funds from discriminating against handicapped persons solely on the basis of their handicap. These two landmark pieces of legislation combine to assure the provision of educational and related services to all handicapped children, regardless of the severity of their handicapping condition.

The issue, then, of inclusion or exclusion of special education students from statewide testing programs is covered by these two laws. Contingent upon performance on tests, many state and local education agencies award diplomas, promote students from grade to grade, and allocate resources for compensatory or remedial programs. Special education students may not be categorically excluded from receiving funding or privileges available to other students as a result of classification as a student with special needs.

From a more global perspective, special education students may not be excluded from possible long-term improvements in curriculum and instruction which may accrue from the implementation of a competency-based education program.

The legislation mandating Louisiana's Basic Skills Test, therefore, was consistent with federal legislation in specifically including special education students. The development of policy alternatives for the testing of these students, however, was a complex process. The primary purposes of this paper will be: (a) to review major issues involved in implementing a statewide testing program which includes special education students and (b) to describe Louisiana's response to these issues.

Five issues will be discussed: (1) inclusion/exclusion of special education students, (2) development of alternative standards for students not tested, (3) test procedural and format modifications, (4) issues involved in research based on the test performance of special education students, and (5) involvement of consumer advocacy organizations.

Inclusion/Exclusion of Special Education Students

As previously stated, current federal legislation (as well as state legislation and litigation) has established the participation of special education students in educational programs. Arbitrary exclusion of special students from testing programs would be inconsistent with these laws. Some minimum competency testing programs, however, have chosen to allow exclusion of students in certain special education categories, particularly students whose intellectual abilities are severely impaired. Other programs have allowed for "exemptions" for some students on an individual basis, with the decision for exemption usually requiring parental permission and having an effect on receipt of a diploma or on promotion.

In developing policies for including special education students, the Louisiana Department of Education avoided exclusion or exemption based on special education classification. Instead, the decision as to whether a child would be tested would be made by the child's individual education program (IEP) committee. P.L. 94-142 provides for the annual development of an IEP for each child by school personnel, parents, and the child, whenever appropriate. Each child's educational program is to be considered in the IEP meeting to determine if the child is addressing state minimum skills, and, therefore, should be tested on these skills. Students determined by the committee to be addressing state minimum skills in their educational program (although not necessarily to have mastered such skills,) are said to be in "specially designed regular instruction." These students are tested as a part of the Basic Skills Testing Program. Students who are not addressing state minimum skills are said to be in an "alternative to regular placement." These students are not included in the Basic Skills Test Program. A standard IEP form is developed by the State Department of Education and used for all IEPs in the state. Space to designate specially designed regular instruction or alternate to regular placement is included on the form. Decisions as to participation in the testing program are made annually. As an additional safeguard, parents whose children are in an alternative to regular placement must sign a statement on the IEP form indicating that they understand that this placement may mean the child will not receive a regular diploma. Failure to obtain the signature means that the child will participate in the testing program.

A distinct advantage of this policy over the exclusion of some categories of special education students is the individualization of the process. Input from IEP committee members who know the child and his school program make

the decision annually. One disadvantage of this policy alternative is inconsistency in definition of the two terms, specially designed regular instruction and alternative to regular placement. Some misunderstanding exists among practitioners concerning a distinction between resource room (or "mainstreamed") students and those in a self-contained class. Placement in a particular type of class actually has no bearing on the decision of including or excluding a child from the testing program. A second possible problem area arises concerning the issue of informed consent. Research concerning IEP meetings (Gilliam, 1979; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, and Curry, 1980) has indicated that parents are often passive participants in such meetings. It is difficult to determine whether parents understand the long-term implications of making such a decision.

Additional issues arise in developing policy for testing special education students in ungraded classes. This is a common situation with most self-contained classes. Students are not actually assigned to the second grade or third grade, but may be in a class for elementary mildly mentally retarded children.

In developing strategies for dealing with the problem of testing level for special education students in ungraded classes, the Louisiana Department of Education studied the following possibilities: (1) excluding students in ungraded classes; (2) including only those students whose chronological age would indicate they would ordinarily be placed in the second grade; (3) allowing off-level testing and (4) requiring teachers to determine the grade level at which the student was currently functioning. The various strategies were considered in a series of meetings with state Accountability and Special Education staff, as well as meetings with local special education supervisors and test coordinators. The groups consulted were concerned that criteria

for testing students in ungraded classes not disallow any student who might benefit from participation in the Basic Skills Test. At the same time, it was not seen as beneficial for a student addressing but not having mastered second grade skills to continue to take the second grade test year after year.

The compromise position reached by Department staff resulted in the development of the following criteria for testing special education students in ungraded classes: (1) placement in specially designed regular instruction according to the IEP, (2) teacher judgment as to whether the student's IEP indicates that he is addressing second grade state minimum skills, and (3) a chronological age range of 4 years. For the Grade 2 test for example, a student in an ungraded class must be 7, 8, 9 or 10 years of age.

The decision as to the grade level reflected by the student's IEP is made at the school level. While the use of a range of chronological ages allows for developmental delay and difficulties in learning, this system does not require that schools determine how many 14-year-olds, for example, are addressing second grade skills. It is very likely that students older than 10 and still addressing second grade skills will be placed in an alternative to regular placement in the IEP meeting.

In summary, the issue of including or excluding special education students is not a simple one. The diverse nature of special education dictates that complex solutions are often necessary. The Louisiana Department of Education has chosen to develop policies which allow for maximum individualization in determining whether a student should be tested.

Development of Alterrative Standards

The existence of a dichotomy concerning Louisiana students' participation in the Basic Skills Test indicates the need for a means of evaluating

those students not in specially designed regular instruction. Often these students are addressing non-academic areas as major emphases in their school program. Motor skills, self-help training, and basic communication skills may comprise a student's program.

In order to establish criteria for promotion and graduation for this group of students, the Office of Special Education of the Louisiana Department of Education organized task forces of skilled teachers to develop alternative standards for special education students. Two sets of skill sequences have been developed and are being pilot tested this year: Alternative Standards for Mildly Handicapped Students and Alternative Standards for Moderately, Severely, and Profoundly Handicapped Students. The documents include skill sequences for elementary and secondary students in all curriculum areas.

Use of the alternative standards is then the basis for the awarding of the state Certificate of Achievement, an alternative to the regular diploma. In order to receive the Certificate of Achievement at the completion of his school career, a student must have met attendance requirements and must have completed a minimum of 70% of his IEP objectives. IEP objectives are to be based on the skill sequences from the appropriate alternative standards document. Teacher judgment is used to determine completion rate for objectives.

Strengths of this approach to alternative standards include: (1) the extension of the accountability program to all students, not just those studying reading and mathematics, and (2) development of a mechanism for a state-approved certificate for special education students not addressing state minimum skills. The certificate is not awarded simply on the basis of years enrolled in school, but implies mastery of an individually designed program of education.

Test Procedural and Format Modifications

The development of test modifications is another issue of major concern in implementing a statewide testing program including special education students. While test modifications should not be so extensive as to give an unfair advantage to special education students, it is apparent that a student with a visual impairment will need a Braille or large-print test, that the student with poor fine motor skills will need assistance in completing a machine-scorable answer sheet, and that a student with a limited attention span may need extra time or multiple sittings for test completion. The key to effective test modifications is accommodation for a child's handicap without invalidating the test as a measure of basic skills.

The difficulty in developing options for test procedural or format modifications is the lack of research in this area. McKinney and Haskins (1980) studied the extent of utilization of modifications on the North Carolina Minimum Competency test. One difficulty with this study was the analysis of use or non-use of modifications, rather than study of the effects of specific modifications on test performance. An extensive assessment of test modifications for learning disabled students has been completed by the Florida Department of Education (Beattie and Algozzine, 1981). Further research is needed for other exceptionalities, however, including elementary-level students likely to be involved in minimum competency programs used for promotional purposes.

Currently, Louisiana allows most of the test modifications included in other minimum competency testing programs. Test modifications for the 1981-82 Basic Skills Test include the following:

1. Braille edition
2. Large-print edition

3. Answers recorded by test administrator
4. Extended time allowed for test administration
5. Instructions given in sign language
6. Student allowed to mark responses in the test booklets
7. Test administered individually or in small groups
8. Directions repeated
9. Math test read to students

Louisiana's policy related to modifications is unique in that test modifications are not limited to students with particular exceptionalities, but may be used by any special education student as needed. A learning disabled or mentally retarded student who might be easily distracted by a page containing many test items, lines, or pictures could use a large-print test booklet with a simplified page layout. Test modifications are selected in the IEP meeting, thus allowing for input from parents, therapists, and teachers.

One possible concern related to test modifications is rate of utilization. Some modifications, such as individual or small group administration, may pose logistical problems for practitioners. One possibility is that special education students tested by regular teachers in a mainstreamed homeroom will be less likely to be allowed modifications. A second possibility is that timing of fall state-level data collection for large-print tests makes it difficult to estimate the number of students who might need such a test format. Research concerning utilization of modifications and effects of each of the modifications on test performance will be conducted each year by the Louisiana State Department of Education.

Basic Skills/Special Education Research

Despite the critical need for research into the effects of the Basic Skills

Test on special education students, experience in field testing has led Department of Education personnel to note several difficulties in conducting such research:

1. Low incidence handicaps

Field testing of the Grade 2 Basic Skills Test involved a 20% statewide sample. The sample was selected by using classroom teachers' names. Of the approximately 11,000 students participating in the field test, 490 were special education students. An additional 19 students in residential schools for sensorially impaired persons participated in a special pilot study. At Grade 2 many special education students have not yet been identified. Even considering the lower rate of identification, however, special education students were underrepresented in the field test sample. The result of the low proportion of participation by special education students in the pilot was an inadequate number of students in most special education classifications for purposes of analysis. In order to alleviate the problem this year a special pilot of students in higher incidence categories (learning disabled, mildly mentally retarded, and slow learners) is planned. The problem of numbers will remain, however, with exceptionalities such as visual impairments, hearing impairments, and orthopedic handicaps. In field testing, when multiple test forms are used, the problem becomes even more complex.

2. Possibility of misclassification

A second difficulty in conducting testing research with special education students is the possibility of misclassification. McKinney and Haskins (1980) noted that misclassification was a significant problem in the North Carolina Competency Testing Program. Two kinds of misclassifications can occur: coding errors or actual misclassification as to exceptionality. In Louisiana, test administrators are required to code the student's special education

classification on the test answer sheet. Possible sources of error include lack of familiarity with the student's IEP and confusion over which of several handicapping conditions may be the primary handicap. Test administrators are instructed that classification must coincide with information on the student's IEP. Monitoring of a sample of students to determine misclassification rate is planned this year.

A more serious problem occurs when actual misclassification has taken place. Although federal and Louisiana state legislation has numerous safeguards concerning pupil appraisal and placement, some error does occur and must be considered in conducting research.

3. Statistical analysis

The appropriateness of statistical procedures commonly used for reporting test scores of regular students is another area of concern. The average percent correct (APC) is the statistic which has typically been used for score reporting of test results in Louisiana. An advantage, then, of reporting performance of special education students using the APC is familiarity with this type of score. Reporting for regular education students on the Louisiana State Assessment is based on the APC at the state, parish, school, and individual student level. A disadvantage of this form of reporting, however, is the amount of information omitted by the use of the APC alone. The reporting of an average score or APC does not give information about the distribution of scores. Within a special education classification, such as learning disabled, for example, the dispersion among scores is not indicated by the mean. A second disadvantage in relying on APC reporting alone for special education students is that the mean is strongly affected by extreme scores when a distribution is very skewed and numbers are small. Distributions of scores within special education

categories are often skewed distributions. A possible solution for this problem is the reporting of a median and semi-interquartile range in addition to a mean for special education categories.

4. Political implications of score reporting

One additional difficulty in dealing with research related to the testing of special education students concerns score reporting. The possibility of aggregating scores of special education students and regular students is one alternative, especially at the state and district levels. In situations where comparisons are made by the news media among school districts this alternative is not considered desirable by school administrators. School districts including more special education students in testing would be likely to have lower district-level mean scores.

Separate score reporting then becomes necessary for special education students. In Louisiana there are 15 special education classification codes used for statewide testing. Because a report which furnishes information about all special education students combines such diverse groups as gifted/talented, visually impaired, and autistic students, separate reports are needed for each exceptionality at each level. The production and distribution of so many reports then becomes a logistical problem.

One interesting point concerning score reporting for special education students is that there are certain exceptionalities which may not be treated separately from regular education students because of political implications. In Louisiana, a compromise was reached by reporting scores of gifted/talented, hospital/homebound, and speech impaired students with the scores of regular students. School administrators do not wish to have these groups treated separately.

The politics of score reporting is a major consideration in any minimum

competency testing program. The additional considerations of special education reporting make this area even more complex.

Involvement of Consumer Advocacy Organizations

Since the 1960s the growth of consumer organizations representing the interests of handicapped persons has been phenomenal. Parent groups are skilled as lobbyists, service providers, and as public information specialists.

The relationship between consumer groups and education personnel involved in test development and implementation is an area which has typically been given little attention. Such groups as the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, the Association for Retarded Citizens, and the Coalition for Citizens with Disabilities, however, are knowledgeable about educational programming and have concerns about the implications of state testing programs for the students they represent.

In Louisiana, the Department of Education has made involvement of consumer groups a priority with the implementation of the Basic Skills Test. Activities which have been accomplished with these groups include:

- Distribution of printed information concerning the Basic Skills Test (test modifications, definition of terms, criteria for testing students in ungraded classes, parent activities for teaching basic skills)
- Involvement of group representatives in Bias Review Workshops
- Presentations by State Department of Education Staff at numerous state and local advocacy organization meetings to explain testing policies and procedures

The Louisiana Department of Education has worked to establish open communication with consumer advocacy organizations. While all members of the various groups are not advocates for the Basic Skills Test, willingness to share information and accept suggestions has fostered an improved relationship between the State Department of Education and consumer groups concerning the test.

Summary

In summary, the Louisiana Department of Education is involved in the implementation of a Basic Skills Test which will serve as a measure of skills for regular and special education students. Policy development has focused on individualizing decisions concerning test participation and modifications. Alternative standards have been developed for special education students not addressing state minimum skills. State Department of Education staff are working to solve difficulties in conducting research and reporting test scores of special education students. Consumer organizations are being involved in test development and implementation.

The application of minimum competency testing programs to special education students poses a variety of difficult problems. The implications of each policy and procedure must be considered in light of students with a range of physical and intellectual abilities. The outcome of careful consideration of these issues in planning testing programs will be the development of policies which assure a test which is fair for all students involved.

References

Beattie, S. and Algozzine, B. Assessment of minimum competency in grades three and five: An analysis of modifications to Florida's State Student Assessment Test-I (Final report draft - Department of Education Contract #080-187). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, April 1981.

Gilliam, J. E. Contributions and status rankings of educational planning committee participants. Exceptional Children, 1979, 45, 466-467.

Goldstein, S., Strickland, B., Turnbull, A. P., and Curry, L. An observational analysis of the IEP conference. Exceptional Children, 1980, 46, 278-286.

McKinney, J. D. and Haskins, K. G. Performance of exceptional students on the North Carolina Minimum Competency Test. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1980.